**TLC PODCASTS: Reading** **for academic purposes**

For our first podcast, we’ll start with reading! While it seems simple enough, there are many ways to read. Think about the differences in the ways you read a newspaper or a magazine, a tourist guide or a novel, a recipe or the leaflet in a package of medicine. On one hand, texts are presented differently; on the other, you have different purposes and goals in reading them. Reading actively and critically for your studies is a particular skill. And as with any other skill, it is one you can learn, practice, and improve.

In this podcast, I’d like to propose some ideas on how to approach your course reading lists and how to explore and engage in academic texts actively and critically.

**Selecting** **your** **readings**

Taking a thoughtful, critical approach to texts begins already with decisions about what you chose to read. By now you may have discovered that course reading lists can be long. Note that, in most cases, your teachers do not expect you to read every word of every text on the list! Some are “core” or “essential readings”; others are suggestions. There are many clues about which texts are most helpful, depending on what you are looking for.

One factor in deciding which readings to do, in which order, is the level of the reading. For example, if you find that you are struggling with the very basic concepts of a subject, consider beginning with introductory texts. Some students start with a Google search – and this can be helpful. Remember though, there are many *academic* sources that are written as basic introductions to a subject. Look out for subject-specific “dictionaries”, “handbooks” or “encyclopaedias”. In the resources for reading, this podcast, you’ll find a list this type of introductory text found on the LSE Library online catalogue.

Different types of texts serve different purposes. Your reading lists will likely include journal articles, edited books, and monographs. You can select different types of text depending on what you are looking for. For instance, journal articles often feature empirical work and include analyses and findings, methods, and literature reviews. Typically, it takes less time to publish a journal article compared to a book. So texts from journals may also be more up-to-date than books. Edited books (where you’ll see the letters “Ed.” after the editors name in the bibliographic information) are usually a collection of chapters by different authors around a central theme. These books can help you discover different perspectives and debates around a topic. A monograph is an entire book written by a single author. These are usually more specialised, in-depth treatments of a specific topic.

Other information you can use to decide what to read includes the date of publication, the publishers, and whether the book has been reprinted in several editions. Consider whether you want the most recent thinking on a subject, or whether you’d prefer to explore views on a subject that preceded important political event, the invention of some technology, or the emergence of a school of thought. Consider who is publishing the work. Think about what countries and institutions texts come from and whether there any particular advantages or disadvantages, or perhaps biases that could be associated with this.

Be sure you cover the “essential” readings; but remember that you should also begin to develop skills that allow you to find other useful texts. The reading list is a selection only. You also need to learn to do independent research and to find relevant sources that are not on a reading list. You can begin to do this by looking out for references within your readings and by learning to use library search tools and academic databases. When you begin to write essays and dissertations, there will not necessarily be a reading list provided for you.

Evaluate and prioritise the readings you select from your list. Depending on what you aim to accomplish by reading, you should seek different types of texts. Finally, if you have a doubt, ask your course lecturers for advice on how to approach the reading lists they have prepared.

Once you’ve selected a text to explore, the next step to read actively.

**Exploring and engaging in texts** **actively**

Reading actively is quite different from starting at the top of page one, and moving your eyes across every line, and turning the page once you’ve arrived at the bottom! Reading actively involves constantly questioning the text, questioning yourself, checking and testing your understanding.

This approach to reading is closely linked to the nature of what you are being asked to do. You are not reading to memorise definitions or to recall facts or figures. Instead, you are reading in order to understand different perspectives on a subject and to prepare yourself to evaluate these perspectives. Your goal is to be able to formulate an understanding for yourself and to make judgements on what you’ve read – not to repeat what you’ve read.

In order to do this, think about reading in different “phases”. First, before you even pick up a text, take time to **reflect** and formulate some ideas about what you’d like to discover. Ask yourself *why* you’re reading? What is it that you would like to find out? When you’ve thought of what specifically you are looking for, write it down.

Next, **scan** the title and author of the text you’ve selected. Note what kind of text it is, title of the book or journal or other larger work, the year, headings, sub-headings, titles of the data tables, etc. After this initial “visit”, you are ready to put the text aside again for a moment, and think about what you can expect to find in the text. Consider this together with what you are looking for and write it down.

Next, you are ready to **skim** read the text. Read the abstract, if there is one. Read the introduction and then, the conclusion. You should be able to identify the main argument of the text and how the author will make this argument. Again, put the text down and, in your own words, try to write down the author’s main thesis – what he or she would like to convince you of by the time you reach the end of the text. It is important to try to put this in your own words. If you are not able to formulate this on your own, you may not have understood what you’ve read so far. Remember that understanding is more important than collecting facts – so don’t bother spending a lot of time copying down facts and definitions from the text without first understanding what the main point of the text is.

Finally, have a look at the structure of your text and **map** it out. Be sure you have an understanding of the various parts of the article or chapter and what each part contains. This is a relatively easy task for some texts. Often, the final paragraph of the introduction gives a good indication of how the argument is presented – what the author plans to do in each section. Again, put the text to one side and write or draw out this structure for yourself.

At this stage, reconsider what you wrote down at the beginning about what you were hoping or expecting to gain from the text. Now that you’ve thought and written about what you’d like to get out of the text, what you can expect from the text, and the author’s main point and how it will be developed, you are ready to decide what to do next. Will you find what you were looking for originally? Will you find something else of interest?

It is up to you to decide which parts to address first – based on your own reading goals that you noted, and the parts of the text you have spotted as potentially useful. There is no requirement to read the text in the order the author presents it. There is also no requirement to read every part of the text with the same degree of attention. Prioritise what you’d like to gain from the text and give attention to each part accordingly.

After you’ve read a section in more detail – stop reading and take time to think about what that section means. Sometimes it is not entirely clear – but attempt to make some sense of it. It can be helpful to refer back to the notes you wrote in the preparation, scanning, and skimming stages. Try not to lose sight of WHY you are reading this article in the first place.

In addition to writing down what you have understood, also write down what you haven’t understood! Formulate a few clear and specific questions about the text. You can raise these questions in a reading seminar or during office hours with your teacher.

This approach to active reading may seem like a lengthy process. But the alternative – passively reading every line, without any particular goal in mind, and without taking time to reflect on what you are actually understanding from the text – takes a lot of time and energy. It can also seem a bit discouraging; you might find that your eyes are just moving across lines of text without understanding anything at all! Remember that active reading is a process of questioning the text and yourself!

In this podcast, we’ve talked about some ideas about how to approach your course reading lists and how to explore and engage in academic texts actively and critically. I’d like to leave you with a few thoughts on how to use your time and energy wisely as you read.

Spending long periods of time with one text may not be the best use of time. If you find that reading is long and laborious, consider scheduling two or three shorter periods of time for a text rather than a block of two or three hours. As you plan your workday or work week, instead of reserving a large block of time for one text, consider planning to prepare, scan, skim, and map two or three texts in one work session. After you’ve had a break – or perhaps the next day – review the notes you’ve made on the set of texts, consider how the texts relate to each other, and decide which parts of which texts you’ll explore further. We’ll take a closer look at making notes from your reading in the next podcast.

In-depth reading, or reading for analysis, may be more challenging than selecting texts, scanning, or skim-reading. There are other reading-related tasks that require less concentration and focus – downloading, photocopying, or printing texts, retrieving books or journals from the library, searching databases, organising references and notes in Mendeley, EndNote or other information management tools.

Think about your energy and attention levels throughout the day and consider which times of day are more suitable for you to take on more challenging aspects of reading, compared to the less effortful reading tasks. Plan your reading tasks in relation to your other work and your natural cycles of energy and attention. For example, if you are a morning person, you might download or retrieve reading materials and make a record of the basic bibliographic information in the evening, so that you can sit down in front of your text and get started, free from distractions, first thing in the morning.

I hope you’ve gotten some helpful ideas about how to select your readings and how to explore and engaging in texts actively. If you have questions about how to approach your reading, don’t hesitate to get in touch with your academic adviser in your department. If you’re having trouble searching for material, contact the liaison librarian for help. If you have other questions, please do get in touch with us here at the Teaching and Learning Centre. Also, keep an eye out for our central events and workshops on reading and other study skills throughout the year.

The next podcast is also about reading. We’ll focus more specifically on what kind of notes you can take to make the most of your reading. Thanks for listening!